

NOTES ON THE DESERT DEATH ADDER (*ACANTHOPHIS PYRRHUS*) BOULENGER 1898, WITH THE FIRST REPRODUCTIVE RECORD.

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This little known species was first described in 1898 by Dr G.A. Boulenger, the type specimen being collected at Station Point (Waite). '*Pyrrhus*' meaning fire is an appropriate specific name for this snake, when agitated it flattens its entire body, displaying striking red and yellow warning colours.

Due to its remote habitat and the efficiency of its camouflage, this species is seldom collected and little is known of its biology. It seems to share most of the habits of its close relative the Common Death Adder - *Acanthophis antarcticus*, being an efficient burrower amongst loose sand and leaf litter. The long, thin tail, which can have either a white or black tip, is used to lure prey, being wriggled convulsively in a manner very reminiscent of an injured caterpillar. Lizards are its main prey item but other small vertebrates are also eaten, observations in captivity have shown it to be prone to cannibalism, therefore, specimens are best kept in individual cages.

Mainly nocturnal, it appears to be most active just after dusk, when it emerges from its daytime retreat and actively forages amongst clumps of porcupine grass (*Triodia* sp.). These grass clumps are the predominant feature of its habitat, and the death adder uses them to its best advantage, burrowing under large clumps, whose sharp spines act as a deterrent to potential predators.

Although similar in appearance to the common death adder, it is a more elongate species whose reddish colour, rugose head shields and more strongly keeled body scales are the main key to identification. Desert death adders are less easily agitated than their close relative, however, they will strike with extraordinary speed and precision if sufficiently provoked. I have recorded one bite from the species, the victim (an experienced herpetologist) sustained a single fang puncture from a snap

bite. Typically neurotoxic symptoms were experienced, with the victim first delirious, then comatose. Antivenom was not administered and the patient was released after 12 hours in hospital, with complete recovery being effected in about 7 days. Due to the severity of this bite, and the known toxicity of the common death adder, this species must be regarded as extremely dangerous.

Death adders are ovoviviparous in reproduction but there is little available data for this species, the one known captive breeding record consisted of 12 living young and one still born. The average total length of the juveniles was 162.16 mm and the average weight was 3.39 grams, as the female was gravid when captured, the gestation period is unknown. Both *Acanthophis* species are similar in scalation, although *A. pyrrhus* tends to have a higher ventral count, 134 to 160, as compared to 110 to 140. Mid-body scales are in 21 rows (*A. antarcticus* 21 or 23 rows); subcaudal scales number 45 to 60, of which up to 50% may be divided; the anal plate is entire.

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Range of Common Death Adder (*Acanthophis antarcticus*)



Range of Desert Death Adder (*Acanthophis pyrrhus*)

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